"PICNEER SKETCHES" a play.

from "Maria Chapdelaine."

INTRODUCTION

Narrator: Well he knew she was one of those women who, giving themselves, give wholly, reckoning not the cost; love of body and of soul, strength of arm in the daily task, the unmeasured devotion of a spirit that does not waver. So precious the gift appeared to him that he dared not ask it.

(Fade in music - few bars alone, then fade up voices with music as background.)

Francois: (Almost in a whisper) I am going down to Grand'Mere next week to work on the lumber-dam. But I will never take a glass, not one, Maria! (Hesitating a moment he stammered out) Perhaps . . . they have said something against me?

Maria: No.

Francois: It is true that I used to drink a bit, when I got back from the shanties and the drive; but that is all over now. And it is also true that I used to swear. When one lives all the time with rough men in the woods or on the rivers one gets the habit. Once I swore a good deal, and the curé, Mr. Tremblay, took me to task because I said before him that I wasn't afraid of the devil. But there is an end of that too, Maria. All the summer I am to be working for two dollars and a half a day and you may be sure that I shall save money. And in the autumn there will be no trouble finding a job as foreman in a shanty, with big wages. Next spring I shall have more than five hundred dollars, saved, clear, and I shall come back . . . (Hesitating) You will be here still . . . next spring?

Maria: Yes.

Narrator: And after the simple question and simpler answer they fell silent and so long remained, wordless and grave, for they had exchanged their vows.

(Bring up music, then fade.)

Narrator: Summer has passed. Winter has come. Outside, the neighbouring forest, and even the fields won from it, were an alien unfriendly world, upon which they looked wonderingly through the little square windows. And sometimes the world was strangely beautiful in its frozen immobility, with a sky of flawless blue and a brilliant sun that sparkled on the snow; but the immaculateness of the blue and the white alike was pitiless and gave hint of the murderous cold.

All winter long Maria had dreamed of Francois and spring.

(Fade in music, very soft, and voices.)

Francois: Next spring I shall have more than five hundred

dollars saved, and I shall come back . . . You will be here still . . . next spring?

Maria: Yes.

(Fade music and bring in Narrator.)

Narrator: That he return in the spring . . . Dreaming of his return, of Francois, the handsome sunburnt face turned to hers, Maria forgets all else, and looks long with unseeing eyes at the snow-covered ground which the moonlight has turned into a glittering extent of some magic texture, like to ivory and mother-of-pearl , -- at the black pattern of the fences outlined upon it, and the menacing ranks of the dark forest.

Narrator: New Year's Day, and not a single caller! Towards evening the mother of the family, a trifle cast down, hid her depression behind a mask of extra cheeriness.

Mother: Even if no one comes, that is no reason for allowing ourselves to be unhappy. We are going to make la tire.

Narrator: The children exclaimed with delight, and followed the preparations with impatient eyes. Molasses and brown sugar were set on the stove to boil, and when this had proceeded far enough Telesphore brought in a large dish of lovely white snow. They all gathered about the table as a few drops of the boiling syrup were allowed to fall upon the snow where they instantly became crackly bubbles, deliciously cold.

Each was helped in turn, the big people making a merry pretence of the children's unfeigned greed; but soon, and very wisely, the tasting was checked, that appetite might not be in peril for the real la tire, the confection of which was only begun. After further cooking, and just at the proper moment, the cooling toffee must be pulled for a long time. The mother's strong hands plied unceasingly for five minutes, folding and drawing out the sugary skein; the movement became slower and slower, until, stretched for the last time to the thickness of a finger, it was cut into lengths with scissors -- not too easily, for it was already hard. The la tire was made.

The children were busy with their first portions, when a knocking was heard on the door.

(Knock at door.)

Chapdelaine: Ah! Eutrope Gagnon. I was just saying to myself that it would be an odd thing if you did not come and spend the evening with us.

Gagnon: Good evening.

Chapdelaine: You are the only visitor who has come our way to-day, and I suppose you have seen no one either. I felt pretty certain you would be here this evening.

Gagnon: Naturally . . . I would not let New Year's Day go by without paying you a visit. But, besides that, I have news to tell.

Chapdelaine: News? By your face I am afraid you have bad news.

Gagnon: Yes.

Mother: Not about the boys?

Gagnon: No, Madame Chapdelaine. Esdras and Da'Be are well, if that be God's pleasure. The word I bring is not of them -- not of your own kin. It concerns a young man you know. (Under his breath) Francois Paradis. This is what happened. You knew perhaps that he was foreman in a shanty above La Tuque, on the Vermilion River. About the middle of December he suddenly told the boss that he was going to spend Christmas and New Year at Lake St. John -- up here. The boss objected, naturally enough; for if the men take ten or fifteen days' leave right in the middle of the winter you might as well stop the work altogether. The boss did not wish him to go and said so plainly; but you know Francois -- a man not to be thwarted when a motion entered his head. He answered that he was set on going to the Lake for the holidays, and that go he would. Then the boss let him have his way, afraid to lose a man useful beyond the common, and of such experience in the bush.

Maria: (softly) Francois wished to come here -- to me.

Gagnon: The shanty was not very far in the woods, only two days' journey from the Transcontinal which passes La Tuque. But as the luck was, something had happened to the line and the trains were not running. I heard all this through Johnny Niquette of St. Henri, who arrived from La Tuque two days ago.

Chapdelaine: Yes.

Gagnon: When Francois found that he could not take the train he burst into a laugh, and in that sort of a humour said that as it was a case of walking he would walk all the way -- reaching the Lake by following the rivers, first the Croche and then the Cuatchouan which falls in near Roberval.

Chapdelaine: That is so. It can be done. I have gone that way.

Gagnon: Not at this time of year, Mr. Chapdelaine, certainly not just at this time. Everyone there told Francois that it would be foolhardy to attempt such a trip in midwinter, about Christmas, with the cold as great as it was, some four feet of snow lying in the woods, and alone. But he only laughed and told them that he was used to the woods and that a little difficulty was not going to frighten him, because he was bound to get to the upper side of the Lake for the holidays, and that where the Indians were able to cross he could make the crossing too. Only -- you know it very well, Mr. Chapdelaine -- when the Indians take that journey it is in company, and with their dogs. Francois set off alone, on snow-shoes, pulling his blankets and provisions on a toboggan.

Narrator: No one utters a word to hasten or check the speaker. They listen, as to one whose story's end looms into view, before the eyes but darkly veiled, like a figure drawing near who hides his face.

Gagnon: You will remember the weather a week before Christmas -- the heavy snow that fell, and after it the nor'west gale. It happened that Francois was then in the great burnt lands, where the fine snow drives and drifts so terribly. In such a place the best of men have little chance when it is very cold and the storm lasts. And, if you recall it, the nor'wester was blowing for three days on end, stiff enough to flay you.

Chapdelaine: Yes, and then.

Gagnon: He went astray . . .

Narrator: Those who have passed their lives within the shadow of the Canadian forests know the meaning but too well. The daring youths to whom this evil fortune happens in the woods, who go astray -- are lost -- but seldom return. Sometimes a search-party finds their bodies in the spring, after the melting of the snows. In Quebec, and above all in the far regions of the north, the very word, écarté, has taken on a new and sinister import, from the peril overhanging him who loses his way, for a short day only, in that limitless forest.

Gagnon: He went astray . . . The storm caught him in the burnt country and he halted for a day. So much we know, for the Indians found a shelter of fir branches he had made for himself, and they saw his tracks. He set out again because his provisions were low and he was in haste to reach the end of his journey, as I suppose; but the weather did not mend, snow was falling, the nor'west wind never eased, and it is likely he caught no glimpse of the sun to guide him, for the Indians said that his tracks turned off from the river Croche which he had been following and wandered away, straight to the north. When they heard this, men from Ouatchouan set forth after the weather was a little better. But all his footsteps were covered, and they returned saying that they had found no trace; that was three days ago. . . He is lost . . .

Narrator: The listeners stir, and break the stillness with a sigh; the tale is told, nor is there a word that anyone might speak. The fate of Francois Paradis is as mournfully sure as though he is buried in the cemetery at St. Michel de Mistassini to the sound of chants, with the blessing of a priest.

Silence falls upon the house and all within it. Chapdelaine is leaning forward, elbows on his knees, his face working, dully beating one fist against the other.

Chapdelaine: It shows we are but little children in the hand of the good God. Francois was one of the best men of these parts in the woods, and at finding his way; people who came here used to take him as guide, and always did he bring them back without mishap. And now he himself is lost. We are but little children. Some there be who think themselves pretty strong -- able to get on without God's help in their houses and on their lands . . . but in the bush . . . We are but little children.

Gagnon: A good man he was, in very truth a good man, strong and brave, with ill-will to none.

Chapdelaine: Indeed that is true. I am not saying that the good God had cause to send him to his death -- him more than another. He was a fine fellow, hard-working, and I loved him well. But it shows you . . .

Gagnon: No one ever had a thing against him. A man hard to match for work, afraid of nothing and obliging withal. Everyone who knew him was fond of him -- a man without an equal.

Maria: He was a good man, a man without an equal.

Madame Chapdelaine: When we were at Mistassini, seven years ago, he was only a lad, but very strong and quick, and as tall as he is now -- I mean as he was when he came here last summer. Always good-natured too. No one could help liking him.

Narrator: They all look straight before them in speaking, and yet what they say seems to be for Maria alone, as if the dear secret of her heart is open to them. But she speaks not, nor moves, her eyes fixed upon the frosted panes of the little window, impenetrable as the wall. Eutrope Gagnon does not linger. The Chapdelaines, left to themselves, are long without speech. At last the father says in a halting voice:

Chapdelaine: Francois Pardis was almost alone in the world; now, as we all had an affection for him, we perhaps might have a mass or two said. What do you think, Laura?

Madame Chapdelaine: Yes indeed. Three high masses with music, and when the boys return from the woods -- in health, if such be the will of the good God -- three more for the repose of his soul, poor lad! And every Sunday we shall say a prayer for him.

Chapdelaine: He was like the rest of us, not without fault, of course, but kindly and well-living. God and the Holy Virgin will have pity on him.

Narrator: Again silence. Maria well knows it is for her they say these things -- aware of her grief and seeking to assuage it; but she is not able to speak, either to praise the dead or utter her sorrow.

A hand fastened upon her throat, stifling her, as the narrative unfolded and the inevitable end came within her view; and now this hand has found its way into her breast and is crushing her heart. Presently she will know a yet more intolerable pain, but now she only feels the deadly grasp of those five fingers closed about her heart. Other words are said, but they scarce reach her ear; then comes the familiar evening stir of preparation for the night, the father's departure on a last visit to the stable and his swift return, face red with the cold, slamming the door hastily in a swirl of frosty vapour.

Madame Chapdelaine: Come, Maria.

Voices: Prayer.

Madame Chapdelaine: (The usual prayer at an end, the mother whispered) Yet five Paters and five Aves for the souls of those who have suffered misfortune in the forest. (And the voices again rose, this time more subdued, breaking sometimes to a sob.)

Voices: Prayer.

Narrator: When they were silent, and all had risen after the last sign of the cross, Maria went back to the window. The frost upon the panes made of them so many fretted squares through which the eye could not penetrate, shutting away the outside world; but Maria saw them not, for the tears welled to her eyes and blinded her. She stood there motionless, with arms hanging piteously by her side, a stricken figure of grief, then a sudden anguish yet keener and more unbearable seized upon her; blindly she opened the door and went out upon the step.

The world that lay beyond the threshold, sunk in moveless white repose, was of an immense serenity; but when Maria passed from the sheltering walls the cold smote her like the hungry blade of a sword and the forest leaped toward her in menace, its inscrutable face concealing a hundred dreadful secrets which called aloud to her in lamentable voices. With a little moan she drew back, and closing the door sat shivering beside the stove. Numbness was yielding, sorrow taking on an edge, and the hand that clutched her heart set itself to devising new agonies, each one subtler and more cruel than the last.

How he must have suffered, far off there amid the snows! So thought she, as still her own face remembered the sting of the bitter air. Men threatened by this fate had told her that death coming in such a guise smote with gentle and painless hand -- a hand that merely lulled to sleep; but she could not make herself believe it, and all the sufferings that Francois might have endured before giving up and falling to the white ground, passed before her eyes.

No need for her to see the spot; too well she knew the winter terrors of the great forest, the snow heaped to the firs' lower branches, alders almost buried beneath it, birches and aspens naked as skeletons and shuddering in the icy wind, a sunless sky above the massed and gloomy spires of green. She sees Francois making his way through the close-set trees, limbs stiffened with the cold, his skin raw with that pitiless nor'wester, gnawed by hunger, stumbling with fatigue, his feet so weary that with no longer strength to lift them his snowshoes often catch the

snow and throw him to his knees.

Doubtless when the storm abated he saw his error, knew that he was walking toward the barren northland, turned at once and took the right course -- he so experienced, the woods his home from boyhood. But his food is nearly gone, the cold tortures him; with lowered head and clenched teeth he fights the implacable winter, calling to aid his every reserve of strength and high courage. He thinks of the road he must follow, the miles to be overcome, measures his chances of life; and fitful memories arise of a house, so warm and snug, where all will greet him gladly; of Maria who, knowing what he has dared for her sake, will at length raise to him her truthful eyes shining with love.

Fade in Francois + Maria theme, very soft.

Perhaps he fell for the last time when succour was near, a few yards only from house or shanty. Often so it happens. Cold and his ministers of death flung themselves upon him as their prey; they have stilled the strong limbs forever, covered his open handsome face with snow, closed the fearless eyes without gentleness or pity, changed his living body into a thing of ice . . . Maria has no more tears that she may shed, but she shivers and trembles as he must have trembled and shivered before he sank into merciful unconsciousness; horror and pity in her face, Maria draws hearer the stove as though she might thus bring him warmth and shield his dear life against the assassin.

Maria: O Christ Jesus, who didst stretch forth Thine arm to those in need, why didst Thou not disperse the snows with those pale hands of Thine? Holy Virgin, why didst Thou not sustain him by Thy power when, for the last time, his feet were stumbling? In all the legions of heaven why was there found no angel to show him the way?

(Pause)

(Her beads still lay upon the table; she takes them in her hands, and forthwith the words of the Ave mount to her lips:)

Hail Mary, full of grace . . .

Fade voice + bring in music of Ave.
Maria